THE POSTCARD

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The postcard

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If there were bars on the windows the two-storey Filmer School could be mistaken for a jail. As it is, the brick below the windows is stained from the dripping rain of the years, the front grounds are parched, the trees leafless. It could be autumn or spring, it's hard to tell. The sense of desertion is everywhere. There is the photographer who took the picture: H.C. Branch of Webster, Mass., his name burned into the lower right-hand corner of the photograph as well as printed below that. In the upper right-hand corner of the photograph the Stars-and-Stripes is waving in the wind - the flag would have been flying atop its pole only when school was in session. That's what the photograph says.

The postcard says other things. "Father says he <u>did</u> tell B.," signed, "Margaret", in the lower left-hand corner in ink script with a decisive hand. Margaret addressed the postcard to Miss E.M.

Hunter of Oakdale, Mass. "Father" is an intimacy not shared with others therefore Margaret is writing to her sister, otherwise she would write 'Mr. Hunter' or some other formality. Nevertheless, the whole thing irritates Margaret, causing her to underline "did" for emphasis and brevity. In the days before photography, one could write a complete message of at least three sentences on a postcard. Now the photograph has become the whole point of the exercise. You are not sending a message but a picture of a thing, which is supposed to represent ...what? This only adds to Margaret's impatience, of being told what to do and where. She squeezes her five-word message into a tiny space at the bottom of the postcard, as any composition is forbidden on the address side.

Then there is simply the letter "B". It is obvious this person is an intimate of Margaret, Mr. Hunter, and Miss E.M. Hunter, someone they know by the simple declaration of a letter. Maybe that's her name. Or maybe her name is too long to fit into that tiny rectangle. Margaret smiles a little - maybe it's her age but she cannot remember herself, after all this time, what B. stands for.

Margaret wraps her coat over her shoulders, opens the kitchen door, pausing for an instant to look back at the black threat of the telephone pinned to the wall. It had been there for over a year now and she still has not gotten used to it. Her instinct is to write, no matter how brief. A telephone call and it would have been over in a minute. No, it would not.

Margaret walks briskly under the rainbow canopy of leaves, passing in front of the Filmer School, trying to remember when the photograph on the postcard was taken. This, too, is a confusion

in her mind as she descends the hill, turns the corner to the empty street, wanting to make certain her twin sister understands that Father had not let her down.

Mr. Healy is at the counter of the Webster, Mass. post office, his fist clenching his black ink pounder, confirming the beginning of the postcard's journey at 8 AM on September 26th, 1905, the ink smudging the lime-green Benjamin Franklin one-cent stamp.

According to the black ink stamp of the Oakdale, Mass. post office, the postcard arrived there at midnight on September 26th, 1905. Margaret imagines the card being delivered in the morning mail just as Mr. Hunter kisses his daughter on her dry cheek. "I'll be back Friday. Is there anything you need before I leave?"

Miss E.M. Hunter stares out the window and sighs. "No, nothing," she says.

"You really must make an effort, you know. Life goes on." Mr. Hunter is tempted to give her the full force of the facing life 'square on' lecture, until he sees her defiant brown eyes. He strokes her black hair tied tightly into a snood at the back of her head, picks up his suitcase and leaves.

He walks down the stone pathway, guarded on both sides by tall poplars, stops at the mailbox, takes out several letters which he slides into the side pocket of his suitcase, waves to his daughter and heads off for the railway station. The image of his daughter framed in the window would stay with him. So will his impatience. When is she going to snap out of this? He had not taught the girls to conduct their lives with such self-loathing. It

has been over eight months now.

When his daughters were young, they were what twins should be. They dressed the same, had the same interests, they even had the same laughter. They were so alike he often could not distinguish the two of them. But when they started going to the Filmer School, a change came over her. While Margaret became more independent of spirit, more like him, her sister remained the same, more static, seemingly unable to move forward, unable to face life 'square on'.

All the way to the Canadian border Mr. Hunter reads the French grammar textbook that Margaret had sent to him. If he is going to secure the contract to build the three ships and establish a base of operations in Québec City, he will have to speak to the government bureaucrats in the most glowing terms possible. Most of them speak English but it would not hurt to throw in a bit of their native tongue, just to show he does not think of them as colonials. Bureaucrats are the same in Canada or the United States - speak of the future and they'll forget the past.

After the train passes through Canadian customs, Mr. Hunter goes through his mail. Halfway through the stack of envelopes, he comes upon the postcard and stops, eyes frozen, a chill crawling up his spine. That damn school. "Father says he <u>did</u> tell B. Margaret."

He leans his head back and looks at the passing landscape. What a barren land this is - one evergreen tree after another, one rock after another, one wild stream after another, without form or order. At least some of these very pines will be used in the

construction of his ships. Thus order will be created. Margaret had underlined "did". This he knows is not simply for emphasis. There was, in that short, swift line, a rebuke. As soon as he gets back, he will tell Margaret what he thinks of this intrusion. How impertinent of her!

Mr. Hunter is increasingly anxious as the train arrives in Ste. Foy, across the river from Québec City. On the ferry crossing the St. Lawrence River, he can see the Château Frontenac dwarfing the diminutive buildings of the old city below. He will have his usual room in the Château overlooking the city, the harbour, and the river flowing relentlessly to the ocean beyond. He is not anxious about the meetings tomorrow. He is thinking about his daughter still staring vacantly at the window.

However, Miss Hunter is no longer sitting at the window. She is pouring herself a brandy. She takes a sip, swirls it around in her mouth and swallows. It burns all the way down. She takes another, deeper sip. With Father not around to watch her every move, maybe she'll get tipsy as she has done many times since B.'s wedding when she was so angry with B. that she did not even join the receiving line. The thought of shaking the groom's hand and letting him kiss her sends a chill through her tense body. Worse was B.'s granite smile. Better to get drunk and remember the three of them – Margaret, Miss E.M. Hunter, and B. - at the window on the first floor of Filmer School watching Mr. Branch take the photograph of the building on a bleak morning in November.

It seems like such an odd time to take a photograph - the grass is brown, the trees barren. It will be the girls' last year

together, so it is fitting that it would have been at this time of the year, when Nature tells of time's passing. The three of them chuckle at the oddity of Mr. Branch, dwarfed by the large Putnam Marvel camera and tripod, carrying the equipment back and forth several times in front of the school, trying to find the perfect position for the photograph. "It would be faster if he did a drawing," says B.

Mr. Branch was the first person in Webster to buy a photo camera and set up his own studio. He had spent most of his time doing family portraits in the studio but now he is going about the town of Webster photographing the town hall, the library, the textile factory, the churches and the schools.

"I'm making a historical document of our town," Mr. Branch tells the class. "A hundred years from now, people will look at my photographs and will understand how we lived."

B., without raising her hand, stands up. "How will they know how we lived if you just photograph buildings? Where are the people?"

"Well, if you want," said Mr. Branch, "you can stand at the window while I take the photograph. But you'll have to be perfectly still..."

"Why?" B. shoots back.

"I have to expose the plate for at least thirty seconds. I doubt you could stand still for that long. If you don't, you'll just be a blur."

The students watch Mr. Branch on the street vanishing

under the black cloak, adjusting the camera, and setting the lens. He looks odd: a headless body with his legs spread out wide, his back arched forward. B. is bored with the whole process and goes to her desk. "It's stupid," she says. "No one's ever going to care about a building like this." Margaret agrees and returns to her desk.

But Miss E.M. Hunter remains at the window, sympathetic to the painful process Mr. Branch is going through to get a single photograph. "He's an artist," she says. "There is no art without pain." She feels another kind of pain as she continues looking out the window at Mr. Branch and hearing Margaret and B. sharing another secret. There is always a wall around those two, a wall over which she wishes she could throw Margaret; to be alone with B. and tell her everything. She smiles when finally Mr. Branch pulls the glass plate from the back of the camera and raises it over his head triumphantly, his hair disheveled, his face beaming.

Ten years later, Margaret is walking from the post office when she sees Mr. Branch in the middle of the street, his head buried under the black cloak, the large camera at the ready, documenting the construction of Webster's new town hall. Margaret calls out to him but he does not emerge from under the cloak.

Margaret carries on down the street, stopping at the intersection. One must do that these days. There are more and more automobiles in the town and although you can hear them coming, at 20 miles per hour they can be on top of you before you know it. It's a good thing she does stop because here's one coming now like an angry invader bent on destroying tranquility.

Without slowing down, the automobile turns the corner and speeds off down Main trailing a cloud of dirty smoke. Margaret is halfway across the street when she hears the squeal of tires, then the smashing of metal and glass. She turns quickly and sees the camera shattered in pieces and the silent body outline of Mr. Branch under the black cloak. Margaret runs back and stands over the black cloak, unsure of what to do. The driver is surveying the damage to his automobile, muttering, "What the hell was he doing in the middle of the street covered in a black cloak?" A stream of blood eddies out from under the black cloak. Margaret kneels down and pulls the black cloak away. She feels for Mr. Branch's pulse - nothing except for a satisfied smile on his face.

It is the first traffic fatality in the history of Webster. Margaret goes to Mr. Branch's studio to offer her condolences to the staff. The photographs Mr. Branch had taken of the town of Webster over the years are on display for anyone to purchase - at half price. There are large prints of buildings and the numerous postcards that Mr. Branch had made. All the photos are devoid of people.

As Margaret looks through the photographs, she thinks that anyone receiving such a postcard would think Webster is a ghost town. The postcard of the Filmer School appears; she takes it out of the box and looks at it intently. She recalls that day and what B. had said. "Without people, who would care?" It is the first time she has ever seen the photograph. After that November day she had forgotten about it. As she looks, she sees something in the first floor window just to the left of the Ionic columns. Ever

so faint is the image of a white blouse. Margaret recalls that she and B. had walked away from the window, leaving her sister alone looking out the window.

That is why Margaret bought the postcard for two cents and why she mailed it to Miss E.M. Hunter. She wanted her sister to know that she was the only person to be frozen on the photographic glass plate that day, and that Father said he did tell B.

Margaret jumps with surprise when the telephone rings. Heaven's sake, must the whole neighbourhood know? She picks up the earpiece, places it gingerly to her ear, fearing the beetle would bite her, and leans into the mouthpiece. "Hello," she says, sensing her voice being sucked into the electromagnetic ether. A metallic voice answers back, "You have a long distance call from Montréal. Go ahead, please."

"Hello Margaret. How are you?"

No amount of electric echo can prevent Margaret from recognizing that voice. "Hello, B. You sound so far away."

"I'm far away, silly."

"Yes, I know." Always trying to make a point, as if she needs a lesson in geography. "You shouldn't be so extravagant, B. This must be costing you a fortune."

"I should think so. That's why I married for money, not love. You should know that. Now listen, you must come up for a visit. We have this beautiful home on Mount Royal overlooking

the city. On a clear day, I can see all the way to the river. I use my binoculars to count your father's boats."

"They're ships, not boats. And you'll have more to count soon enough. Father is in Québec City signing a contract to build three more."

"My, my, the oceans won't be large enough to float them all."

Margaret grips the earpiece harder. Talking with B. is like playing chess in a state of perpetual check. She never lets you out to make another move nor does she make the decisive one.

"You know the story about Mr. Branch made the newspapers up here. Anyone who gets killed by an automobile these days makes front-page news. It's kind of funny, don't you think?"

"I fail to see the humour in it, B." Margaret no longer understands this woman who was once her best friend. It's more than just the distance or the distorted voice. Back then Margaret had found her rebellious spirit endearing, something to be admired. Now, it's an irritation.

"I don't mean that kind of funny," says B. "I mean funny in a tragic, ironic sense. The first photographer killed in the line of duty." The telephone line crackles, irritated by the thought. "I'm sorry, that was unkind. Mr. Branch didn't deserve that."

"So when are you coming?" asks Margaret.

"What? Coming down there, you mean?"

"Yes. Father says he spoke to you when he was in Montréal last week. He says you'd come down to Oakdale to see..."

"What are you talking about? I never saw your father. Good Lord, what would he possibly have to say to me?"

"To tell you we wanted you to come to see her," Margaret says, panic slowly gripping her.

"Is she still in self-exile?"

"Yes. She hasn't left the house since your wedding. That's why we want you to come...I don't know. Something happened that day."

"Something happened all right. My god, I'll never forget it. She made such a spectacle of herself with all her weeping and clinging to me like I was her mother."

"I've got to go, B."

"What?"

"I can't talk anymore. I have nothing more to say."

"But why does she want me there, Margaret? Why is it so important to her? Why is it so important to *you*?"

"Think about it, B. Think about all the times we left her behind. Think about why she cried at your wedding. I've never done this before but I have to hang up. Goodbye."

Margaret gently drops the earpiece on the hook, feeling her blood pulsing. She picks up the earpiece and tenderly dials as

if it were a living thing. She listens to the interminable clicking. Finally, she hears the ringing tone, again and again. She whispers into the mouthpiece, her palms sweating, "Come on. Answer. I know you're there."

The ringing stalks its way through every corner of the house but Miss E.M. Hunter does not move toward it. She is in her bedroom at the dresser holding a blue silk scarf. She pulls it gently through her hand, the delicate fabric tingling her palm. She looks up at the mirror, her youthful beauty now faded with yellowing sadness, and recalls that day when everything changed…

"Oh, it's beautiful, B. Almost too beautiful to wear."

"Don't be silly."

"It must have cost you a fortune."

"Just put it on," says B. making it sound more like an order. "And when you do, think about me while I am strolling along the banks of the Seine and sipping Chardonnay in a café on the Champs Elysées while some handsome dark-eyed Frenchman, call him Emile, ponders my legs. Finally, after I smile demurely at him, he will come to my table, kiss my hand and without asking he will sit down confidently, expectantly. And using my best French, I will lie to him and introduce myself as Gervaise. Then the night will begin."

Miss Hunter wraps the silk scarf around her neck, gathered up the ends and presses the scarf to her face as if she might use it to hide her tears. "How long will you be gone?" the scarf muffling the pain in her voice.

"I don't know. As long as it takes to forget this silly little town. You should leave, too. Get your father to give you the money and come join me. We could rendezvous in Rome. Yes, Rome! Let's make it Rome."

She envies B.'s insouciance but even if she wanted to go, Father would never give her the money. No, she will probably stay here for the rest of her life with this desire burning like hot coal inside her. She drops the scarf from her face and turned to her. "Kiss me, B." B. leans over and kisses her on the cheek. "There. Now, I've got to go. I'll send you postcards from every city I visit. I promise." And without looking back, she is out the door.

B. does not come back for another year, but she keeps her promise. In the end she sends fifty-four postcards. The last one from Marseilles says that Emile never appeared but Henri did and she is bringing him back to the States to marry him. Moreover, Henri is rich. After the wedding B. moves to Montréal where the culture better suits Henri's lifestyle. And it seems to have suited B.'s too.

The day B. gives Miss E.M. Hunter the scarf is the last time they will be alone together, the last chance Miss Hunter will have to speak the secret. She should have told B. where she wanted to be kissed. Not on her cold cheek. She wanted a kiss on her lips, a warm kiss that would convince B. to stay. Miss E.M. Hunter slips the silk scarf through her tightened palm, then wraps it twice around her neck. She looks at a photograph on the wall next to her vanity table. She steps closer to it, looks at it longingly, remembering that sunny day in June when she, Margaret and B.

had graduated from high school and wanted the moment frozen for eternity.

A photograph can do that now. So with the world spread before them, the three have come to Mr. Branch's studio. He is uncomfortable doing this. Buildings do not move, they do not laugh, and they give the photographer time to contemplate in ways humans do not. Nevertheless, B. has insisted, and when she insists to the point of spreading the bills out in front Mr. Branch, as if something illicit were about to take place, there are few who can say no. The three young women are wearing their most exuberant dresses, their hair perfectly cut and combed, their faces glowing. B. places herself in the middle, her head held high as if she were about to announce her conquering of the world. Just before Mr. Branch snaps the shutter, B. tosses her blue silk scarf around her neck and over her shoulder. She puts her arms around Margaret on one side and E.M Hunter on the other. E.M Hunter places her arms around B.'s waist and squeezes her tight. B. takes a deep breathe and E.M Hunter squeezes just a little more when the shutter snaps. B. breaks free of E.M. Hunter's grasp, turns to her and says, "You're such a child." She bolts from the studio. As always, it is left to Margaret to comfort her sister.

Margaret listens to ringing over and over. Maybe this is a good sign. Maybe it means her sister has finally gotten out of that barren house, making the postcard meaningless.

It is not meaningless to Mr. Hunter, holding the postcard in his hand as he leans against the railing on the boardwalk, Le Château Frontenac casting a shadow over him and the rocky

precipice then sloping out to the dark waters of the St. Lawrence. The day has been a success; the contract has been signed. In a year or two, three more of his ships will be sailing past this spot and out to the ocean. He needs this walk to stretch his legs and to smell the fresh salty air.

Mr. Hunter is tired of looking at this damn postcard. He had always felt there was something between his daughter and B., something sinister, unnatural. When they were in school together, it was always "B. showed Miss Allison a thing or two," or "B. wore this beautiful dress," or "B. wrote this wonderful poem," and on and on and on she'd go as if the girl were a damned saint. Then the crying when B. left for Europe, the postcards that she held with her fingertips, sniffing each one vainly seeking out the slightest aroma or the slightest touch.

And finally, there is her drunken, weeping display at B's wedding. He can hardly look at her and is embarrassed to admit she is his daughter. What Mr. Hunter does not see is that Mr. Branch has taken Miss E.M. Hunter into an anteroom where he has the camera set-up to take photographs of the wedding party and guests. Mr. Branch has seen her distress and he comforts her as best he can. Still being a bachelor, he is somewhat uncomfortable around women and while he cannot deny some attraction for Miss E.M. Hunter, he cannot see her as anything other than the young, vibrant student at the Filmer School. Nevertheless, his tenderness works and shortly Miss Hunter feels better. She asks Mr. Branch to take her picture but he is unsure. "You know, some people feel that when taking their picture it steals a part of their soul."

"It's all right, Mr. Branch. I have no soul to steal." She takes one end of the blue silk scarf, flips it over her shoulder and looks into the lens. Mr. Branch snaps the shutter.

Another vision comes to Mr. Hunter's mind and when it does he grips the railing with both hands, as if holding on for dear life, preventing the oblivion he so desires. The last night. Yes, that last night comes to him with all the force of a steel hull. He is unable to understand Rachel's ultimatum. He cannot comprehend what she is saying – or was it screaming? – about affection being more important than all the ships in the world, or all the money and all the useless things money has gathered around them. Mr. Hunter insists they have much more than material things. They have two beautiful daughters.

"Daughters! What do I care about daughters!" Rachel shouts, knowing they are in the next room and close enough to hear. "I never wanted children, especially a selfish pair like them! I told you that from the start. They were your idea. Never mine!"

When he returns home the following day, the maid hands him an envelope. He does not open it. He knows what the letter will say and pitches it into the fireplace.

That evening at dinner, as if he were chairing a meeting of the company directors, he informs Margaret and Elizabeth that their mother Rachel has left, that she is not coming back, and that he will make absolutely no attempt to find her or bring her back home. "You are both fifteen now and quite capable of taking care of yourselves. I expect you both to face life square on and I'm confident you will do just that." The two girls laugh. This,

of course, is no surprise to either of them and nothing much will change – such is the effect Rachel has had upon their lives. Except for one thing: Margaret wants Rachel's room.

Mr. Hunter recovers his composure when he hears a voice from below calling out to him. There on the slope is a workman with a large canvas bag slung over his shoulder, speaking to him in French. The workman switches quickly into English: "You are not going to jump, I hope?" Mr. Hunter says he will not. With that assurance, the workman tips his hat to him, then descends the slope, disappearing among the rocks and shrubs.

Mr. Hunter has had enough of this bloody postcard. He holds it between his fingers then flicks it over the edge. A gentle breeze carries it upwards for a moment then it flutters down like a dead butterfly, vanishing into the rocks as he conjures up the image of his daughter sitting at the window, staring with empty eyes at the poplars swaying in the wind.

The poplars are the only things that Margaret likes about this place. To her, it has always been the 'escape house', a place of exile with the poplars standing guard, where Father could forget the home in Webster where her mother had walked out one morning with one suitcase, never to return. Margaret had stayed behind, in the shallow hope that one day her mother might come back. But Father wanted no part of the memories, no part of the bitterness each room offered up. As she nears the house, she can see that her sister is not sitting at the window. Well, that's a relief.

The house is quiet when Margaret enters. She goes into the living room and sees a bottle of brandy and an empty glass. She

calls out for her sister. Maybe she has gone out but more than likely she's sleeping it off. She climbs the curved stairway, walks down the hall, taps lightly on the bedroom door, and opens it to an empty bed. Good then, she is not sleeping it off. Margaret sees the window wide open, the wind billowing the chiffon curtains. She goes to the window and is about to close it when she notices a blue silk scarf tied tightly around the latch. She pulls at the scarf to bring it in but it will not budge. It must be caught on the vines. Why would her sister have done this to such a beautiful scarf? She leans out the window. Maybe it's the wind or maybe it's the horror that takes her breath away, for dangling lifeless is Miss E.M. Hunter, the blue silk scarf wrapped around her neck.

The postcard does not rest in the rocks for long. Marcel Lantier sees it flutter down and once he finishes picking up several shards of glass, he climbs over a rock and finds it easily. He looks up to the man who threw it, leaning over the balustrade looking down at him with a steely glare. Their eyes meet for an instant then the man walks away disappearing forever as if into the clouds.

Marcel Lantier loves this job. He always looks forward to the autumn clean-up duty in the steep rocky embankment below the boardwalk of the Château Frontenac. Of all the city jobs, this one told of mysteries. Over the years he has found many treasures that people had thrown over the balustrade for reasons he would spend many hours contemplating: coins from around the world, broken champagne glasses, watches, wedding rings, cufflinks, as well as letters and postcards. He wonders why anyone would throw cufflinks over the edge. Perhaps a gift to a spurned lover?

Or perhaps a lover discovered, the cufflinks the evidence? There is a postcard he finds one day in 1901 with a photograph of the Château Frontenac and a note: an American man writing to his wife of the wonderful visit he is having here in "Kaybec", stamped and addressed. Why, Marcel wonders, was it never sent?

The postcard he finds this September afternoon in 1905 is not unusual except for the one sentence written below the photograph: "Father says he did tell B. Margaret." Marcel smiles, anticipating the many hours of thought unraveling the mystery of this one.

That night after dinner, when Lantier sits down to continue his reading of the collected works of Emile Zola, he uses the postcard as his bookmark. He continues doing this as he reads his way through Zola's novels each time finishing with *Les Quatre Evangiles* then starting all over again with *Thérèse Raquin*. He continues doing this until his 69th year when on a February night in 1942, Madame Lantier hears the thump of a book falling on the floor. The dark hallway floor creaks as she goes to Marcel's reading room where she finds him with a contented smile on his dead face. On his chest is a copy of *La Bête Humaine* open at the first chapter. Madame Lantier removes the book, holds her hand to his chest then kisses him on his warm forehead. Madame Lantier smiles. Maybe he was still thinking of the mysteries he wanted to solve. She places the bookmark in the centre of the page and closes the book.

Madame Lantier dies only two years later from what her family and friends say is a broken heart. Their daughter Aline

sells the house but she keeps the boxes of cufflinks, watches and wedding rings that her father had collected over his many years of scouring the embankment below Le Château Frontenac. She also keeps the complete novels of Emile Zola out of respect for her father.

The books remain untouched in Aline's basement until 1992 when her grandson, Jean, opens a bookstore. He has renovated an old building on Rue Petit Champlain at the base of the embankment sloping down from the boardwalk of the Château Frontenac. Jean is certain that an 1895 French edition of the collected works of Emile Zola would be a quick seller and he places the volumes on a prominent shelf in his new bookstore.

There they remain for thirteen years until one September day, Carl Hunter enters the bookstore, a gust of fresh autumn wind following him in. Jean senses the young man is English, and that he is the last person in the world interested in reading Zola in French. He is wrong. Carl, a student at Tufts University in Boston, is studying French literature and has a particular interest in Zola. He speaks perfect French and for him reading Zola in the original French would be a wonderful experience. But Carl is curious to know how Jean obtained such a rare collection of Zola's works.

Jean is flattered that this young man would take such an interest. Jean also cannot deny his attraction to him: the twinkle of his brown eyes; his long, flowing salt-and-pepper hair; and inviting youthfulness of his smile. However, even in these modern times, one must be discreet, and cautious. Carl follows Jean quite

willingly to the back of the building where the rocky slope rises up to the boardwalk of Le Château Frontenac. It's almost with the tone of a dare that Jean invites Carl to climb the seemingly endless stairway to the boardwalk. As they do, Jean tells Carl of the work his great-grandfather did cleaning the slope of not only the garbage but also of the cufflinks, watches, wedding rings and postcards that he collected and kept.

They reach the boardwalk, both out of breath. For Carl, the energy spent seems like the aftermath of love itself. The sky is pure cerulean and the fading sunlight is refracting off the trees and rooftops in piercing golden rays. The harsh wind from the east tells of the coming of winter. Carl tells Jean that it was from here, according to his father, that his great-grandfather would come to look out over the harbour and view the ships he had built as they set off for the Atlantic. He made a fortune building those ships and then lost it all when most of them were torpedoed during the First World War. "I wonder," says Jean, "if our great grandfathers ever met here?" Carl chuckles at such an idea. From everything he's ever heard about "the great shipbuilder", he would hardly have spoken to anyone literally and figuratively "below his station in life".

With the coming darkness, as night stretches into the long hours of evening, Carl and Jean come closer and closer together, returning to Jean's apartment above the bookstore for dinner, wine and lovemaking.

In the morning, Jean shows Carl his great-grandfather's boxes of found articles. Carl picks out a few of the artifacts,

handling each one with tender respect. He knows these things represent lives long since gone, of hopes long since dashed, and of messages never delivered. "Why would anyone throw away a postcard? Some of them have stamps on them," says Carl.

"And some of them have stories," says Jean. "That's why my great-grandfather kept them."

By the time Carl is ready to leave a couple of days later, he and Jean have fallen in love. There are promises of a return visit over Christmas and after that? Who knows. Carl walks along the boardwalk taking in a last view of the city and the St. Lawrence as the fresh autumn wind blows through his hair. He is carrying a box containing the complete set of Zola's novels that Jean has given to him as a gift – a token of his affection. Carl stops at the balustrade to look out to where the Hunter ships once sailed out to the Seven Seas. He leans forward to take in the smell of the wind, to inhale it deep into his lungs, when suddenly he hears a voice in French saying, "You're not going to jump, I hope?" Startled, Carl looks down to a man coming up between some rocks on the slope. He has a large canvas bag slung over his shoulder, a sly smile on his reddened face and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Carl shakes his head. The man tips his hat to him then disappears among the rocks and bushes.

Carl is not able to start reading any of the Zola novels until Thanksgiving when his family traditionally gathers in the ancestral home in Oakdale, on the outskirts of Boston. The Hunter clan, as Carl has been told, has been coming here for Thanksgivings and Christmases, Easters and baptisms, weddings and funerals since

the turn of the century - the 20th of course, for it was now the 21st and nothing much has changed. Carl has been told many things about this place and as he walks down the stone pathway with the tall poplars on each side bending in the harsh November wind, he pauses to look up at the third floor window where, he has been told, his great-Aunt Elizabeth, the one who had been afraid of heights, had committed a final solitary act of defiance. Carl continues on to the house knowing that every family has at least one secret that is never talked about or that history had simply swallowed up. There is, however, a difference this year, for Jean is walking beside him more nervous than he has ever been before in his life. Regardless of the Carl's sincere assurances, Jean says, "This is America. They crucify gays here." "No we don't," says Carl with a sly smile. "Besides Massachusetts isn't America. "

As soon as the door opens, Jean's apprehensions vanish. Carl's father, mother, sisters, and several aunts and uncles welcome him like an old friend and it is not long before he has a glass of wine in hand and is being peppered with questions about the romance of Québec City. He has little time to catch his breath.

The following day, Carl takes Jean into the sanctum that is Elizabeth's room. It has been left exactly as it was the day she hanged herself from the window. This is the promise that Margaret made and a legacy that the family has held like an albatross through the generations.

Draped over the chair in front of the vanity table is a blue silk scarf. On the wall next to the vanity are two photographs. Jean is curious and looks closely at each one. The first one, Carl explains,

is of his great-aunts when they graduated from high school in 1905. The woman in the middle with the scarf around her neck was their friend B. "She married three or four times. All ended in divorce. Apparently, she died penniless in Montreal sometime in the 30s. Aunt Margaret became a newspaper publisher. At one time she owned half the newspapers in the State. She was seventy when she died. The grand-dame of the family. This photo is of Elizabeth apparently taken at B's first wedding. Does she look happy or what."

Jean is up close to the photos, looking intently at each one. He points to the group shot. "That grip your great-aunt has around B? That's not the grip of a friend. She looks like she's in pain. And the scarf," he says pointing back-and-forth at each. "It's the same scarf." Carl moves in on the photos. He nods, "Well, what do you know."

That night after everyone has gone to bed, Carl lays some logs on the fire and settles down finally to read some Zola. He has brought along his favorite, one he has read before in English but never in French - *La Bête Humaine*. He watches the fire devouring the logs, the embers falling below the grate and emitting warmth to his face. He feels a chill as if a hand is moving listlessly up his back. He turns, feeling the room is cold, the heat unable to penetrate. He senses something in the room but there is no noise except for the crackling of the fire and the rustling of the leaves of the poplars. He smiles, assuring himself that certain things do not exist. He leans back in the chair, warms his feet near the fire, and opens the book. The postcard flutters into his lap. He picks it up

and brings it closer to the shimmering light of the fire. He reads the hand written note: “Father said he did tell B., Margaret.” He turns it over and reads to whom it was addressed.

Carl comes into Elizabeth’s room. He looks at the photograph of Elizabeth and her sad, watery eyes. Then at the other: the intensity of Elizabeth’s grip and the subtle grimace on B’s face. He places the postcard on the vanity, turns off the light and closes the door.

THE END

The postcard

Richard Stanford

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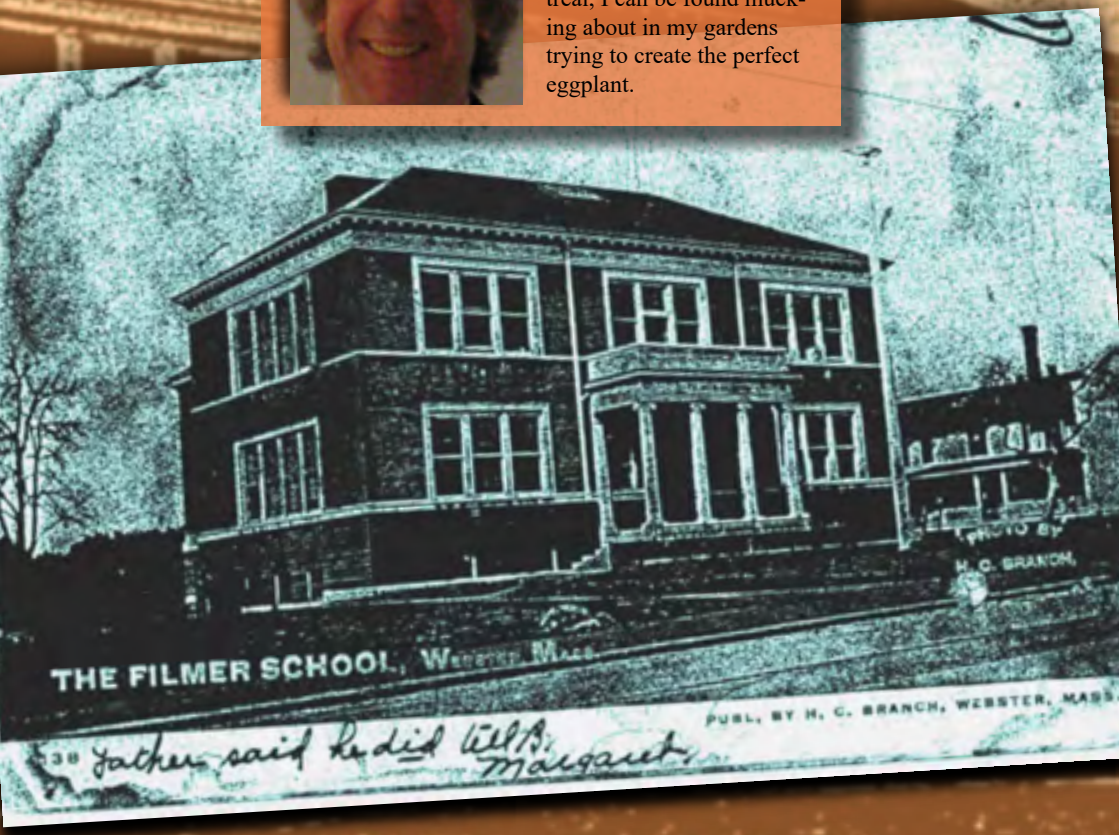
THE POSTCARD

Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.



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